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### If I Knew What My Mother Was Going Through. Book Review. Not Dead Yet: Feminism, Passion, and Women's Liberation. Edited by Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne

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## IF I KNEW WHAT MY MOTHER WAS GOING THROUGH

### BOOK REVIEW

#### ***NOT DEAD YET: FEMINISM, PASSION, AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION. EDITED BY RENATE KLEIN AND SUSAN HAWTHORNE (SPINIFEX PRESS, 2021)***

Dana Vitalosova

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I forgot my age recently; I thought I'd be turning 37 this fall. I asked my mother, confused: "Do you know how old I am?" I was worried she'd think I was testing her memory. I must have looked properly confused, because instead of getting angry, she assured me it's normal to forget one's age at this stage of life. Then, we talked about how when you're in your 30s, numbers don't feel as life changing as when you're 18, 15, or 5.

I'm lucky to have such chats with my mother. We talk about deep stuff as well as more mundane issues. Most of all, I love when I succeed in making her laugh. But being close to her 62-years-old self can also be frustrating—never before prone to angry outbursts, she now regularly explodes because of minor challenges. She forgets; her hearing's not as good as it once was; she's overly anxious and feels tired all the time. When she doesn't want to get out of bed, I don't know whether it's because she's old, lazy, or depressed. I suspect she uses the sentence, "I'm an old lady" to get out of things she doesn't feel like doing. But how can I tell?

If I knew what my mother is going through, I may be able to get on with her better. I'm not going to lie about my motivation—I'd love to find out what it feels like, being old, for me. How will I feel at 70? At 35, I'm not taking signs of my own aging lightly—the white strands of hair, the less youthful skin. Will I be able to cope with the loss of my beauty once men lose interest in me? And, irrespective of looks, what kind of an old person will I be? Will I join a band, or run a marathon, as I see some incredible women do? Or will I shuffle on crutches, slowly, sighing painfully as I walk? Will I be able to influence that?

These are the questions that haunt me. I expected the women in the anthology *Not Dead Yet: Feminism, Passion, and Women's Liberation*, edited by Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne, to provide answers. By putting together this anthology, *Spinifex Press* editors wished to celebrate the Australian publishing house's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Featuring women from all around the world, the anthology had one important rule: The authors had to be at least 70 years old. Thus, the editors ensured that old women have an outlet that finally acknowledges their existence. Alas, the questions I said still haunt me, were not really answered. However, I still enjoyed their essays, especially the more personal ones.

I roared with laughter at Sue Ingleton's obituary for herself and thought I found my intellectual soulmate when I read this outrageously silly paragraph:

Apparently, she [Sue] often lay down of pavements outside building sites whenever simple labourers, having a little boyish fun, would blow a few appreciative whistles and thus, with her legs in the air she would cry out, 'Fuck me! Fuck me!'

Cheryl Adams's account of her "Ramblers' UK Coast to Coast" journey at 72 reminded me of my own passion for hiking as well as of the assorted characters I've met on walks. While reading her funny short story, the figure of one woman I met in the Slovak mountains appeared in front of my mind's eye: in her 70s, with iron legs and shiny gaze, she exuded vitality. This unknown woman who complimented my dog at the top of a hill presented a stark contrast to most women of her age I meet in everyday life. Overweight or frail looking, the 60+ women in my town frown as they trudge around with shopping bags, to prepare meals for their ungrateful husbands.

Kerryn Higgs, in turn, gave me back my faith in feminist organizing with her recollection of having set up a women-only community in the Australian backcountry. Using their savings and raised money, she and her associates built a female separatist house on a beautiful, secluded mountaintop. It was exhilarating and reassuring to read about some of the conflicts among the community's inhabitants. They reminded me of the clashes between feminists that I've experienced, although most of them happened online.

Elsewhere in *Not Dead Yet*, Kerryn Higgs describes disagreements in relation to the definition of "male culture, which could include any aspect of the status quo machinery, the eating of meat, baby boys, or even, at one stage, nails and windows." Thanks to her essay, I became reassured that despite arguments and fallouts, the feminist communities aren't doomed to failure:

The remaining members these days are mostly on the flexible side of the men question. There's still no move to include males in the ownership and decision-making structures and presumably never will be. But we are not as uncompromising as the other women's communities nearby.

Stonewall-riots participant Martha Shelley gave me the feeling of standing on solid ground. Swimming in the online cesspool that are the "transgender wars," I have often bumped into the cries of "the Stonewall riots were started by transgender women of color." I never knew what exactly to make of this statement, and I didn't dare research it as I don't trust most online or even offline sources that deal with this, highly politicized, matter. As a consequence, I found the events of this particular history intellectually destabilizing. Martha Shelley saw the Stonewall events with her own eyes and it's fortunate she's not dead yet as she can set the record straight. Her essay deals not only with the events of Stonewall, but also centers around the topic of truth more generally. It is no wonder she currently helps women and girls physically remain on firm ground—by teaching self-defense.

Although there were more essays that would deserve a mention, I'd like to highlight a particular one that attempted to deeply touch me: "The Homeward Star" by Carol Lefevre. I say attempted because, just as Carol does in her essay, I am reluctant to visit some of the inner spaces that her words promise to open for me.

In her text, Carol describes being given letters she had sent to her mother from all over the world when she was younger. They fill three old suitcases and each one opens a can of memories when Carol decides to sort through them during the Covid-19 quarantine. This activity struck a chord with me. When I was moving recently, I discovered my own trove of letters my sister, cousin, father, mother, and I wrote to each other when I was a kid. Two of the people—my father and my female cousin—are dead now. Unlike Carol, I was barely able to look at the letters, let alone read them. The wounds from these losses are still too fresh.

As Carol Lefevre says, she

had begun to realise that there could be important reasons for forgetting (...)  
The pages clamoured with the names of people who were dead, friends who  
had been intensely alive but had been taken young – there were cancers, and  
two suicides.

She continues, "Having already accepted those losses" she found herself "reliving the bereavements."

I admired the author's courage to revisit her memories, despite the resulting feeling of "coming apart." I am also thankful that Carol Lefevre's essay answered some of my questions about old age. To what it feels like to be old, she responds:

For all its indignities, aging does have about it an ineffable sense of return. I  
feel it in my growing preference for simplicity, replaced by a deepening com-  
mitment to the inner life, and to the completion of creative projects.

Lefevre also addresses the topic I've been too afraid to breach: death. I'll let the reader find out about Carol Lefevre's poetic response by reading the book.

I'm short on time for more writing; however, I'd also love to shout out to other women whose essays in *Not Dead Yet* I enjoyed: Coleen Clare, Sandra Butler, Janice G. Raymond, Phyllis Chesler, Sandra Shotlander, Lynne Spender and Eileen Hailey.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Dana Vitalosova** is a 35-year-old feminist living in Slovakia. From 2015 to 2019 she ran an online feminist magazine in her home country. After being *cancelled* for her views on gender ideology, she decided to focus her efforts on the English-speaking world. Now, she works as a writer and editor at US feminist online magazine *4w.pub*.

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